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Nietzsche's Views on Plato Pre-Basel

Daniel Blue

In an essay published in 2004¹ Thomas Brobjer surveyed Nietzsche's attitudes toward Plato and argued that, far from entering into a dedicated *agon* with that philosopher, he had little personal engagement with Plato's views at all. Certainly, he did not grapple so immediately and fruitfully with him as he did with Emerson, Schopenhauer, Lange, and even Socrates. Instead, he merely "set up a caricature of Plato as a representative of the metaphysical tradition ... to which he opposed his own."² This hardly reflects the view of Nietzsche scholarship in general, but Brobjer argued his case vigorously by ranging broadly over Nietzsche's life, collating his assessments of Plato, and then noting certain standard views which he believes to be overstated. This paper does not so much respond to Brobjer's essay as elaborate on one stage within it. It confines its scope to the years between 1863, when Nietzsche bought his first text by Plato, to 1868, when he proclaimed himself sufficiently versed in that philosopher to review books on his work. We can consider these five years foundational insofar as they encompass the initial turn in Nietzsche's thought from embrace to antipathy. This paper attempts to track the stages of these developments and to investigate when they occurred and what could have caused them. As we will see, the evidence is too thin, and Nietzsche's positions are too riddled with ambiguity, to determine how intimately he grappled with Plato at this time. However, by 1868, a year before he left Leipzig for Basel, he seems to have developed a distaste for that philosopher which he might later refine but never abandoned.

1

As far as we know, Nietzsche first encountered Plato at Schulpforte, the boarding school he attended during adolescence. According to a syllabus,³ students there were supposed to read one dialogue, "probably the *Phaed.*" during their final year.⁴ On 26 Sept. 1863, just before the beginning of that school year, Nietzsche requested permission from his tutor to purchase a volume of dialogues.⁵ (A little less than a year later, he would ask for another installment in the same series.)⁶ We do not know which dialogues he read,⁷ aside from the *Symposium*, but at graduation he would call that his

“favorite literary work.”⁸ Further, during 1864 he submitted a classroom exercise on this dialogue. Titled “On the Relationship of Alcibiades’ Speech to the Rest of the Speeches in Plato’s *Symposium*,” it takes two positions. First, Nietzsche argues that Socrates’ contribution should not be considered a counterclaim to those which preceded. His speech serves rather as a summation and retains what was salvageable from earlier arguments, eliminating elements that were peculiar to the speaker and not readily acceptable by others. Nietzsche also addresses the eruption of Alcibiades at the party and the way in which he makes no theoretical oration but instead brings the subject down to earth by showing how love operates on the individual level. The essay is carefully conceived, elegantly written, exhibits remarkable powers of insight and synthesis, and suggests deep interest in the subject under review.⁹ Clearly, the young Nietzsche did admire this dialogue. However, he does not comment on any other texts by Plato, so it may be that his esteem rests largely on this one work.

Two weeks after graduation, Nietzsche and Paul Deussen traveled together to the University of Bonn and brought with them a letter of recommendation from Carl Steinhart, a professor who had taught them several times and was their Greek instructor during their senior year. Addressed to Karl Schaarschmidt, professor of philosophy at the University of Bonn, it said of Nietzsche that he “is a deep, thoughtful creature, and enthusiastic about philosophy, particularly the Platonic, in which he is already quite initiated. . . . Under your guidance he will joyfully turn to philosophy, for that is where his deepest drive leads.”¹⁰

Steinhardt’s invocation of Plato was apparently correct. While at Bonn Nietzsche took a course on the *Symposium* under Otto Jahn and to the end of his life kept a copy of the latter’s text.¹¹ He then enrolled in a course given by Schaarschmidt on Plato’s writings and philosophy and also attended the same teacher’s course on the general history of philosophy. The latter lectures presumably treated Plato at the beginning, although Nietzsche’s classroom notes have not been published, and I have not seen the originals. It would appear then that at Bonn Nietzsche sustained and perhaps developed the admiration for Plato which had been awakened at Schulpforte.

Nonetheless, these university classes would have instilled a more critical attitude toward Plato than Nietzsche imbibed at Schulpforte. Both Jahn and Schaarschmidt esteemed Plato enough to publish books on his work, but they may have offered skeptical views which tempered Nietzsche’s initial enthusiasm.¹² There is no way to know, for Nietzsche made no significant comments regarding the philosopher during his stay at Bonn. Unfortunately, he does not mention Plato during his first two years in

Leipzig either,¹³ and his silence here is particularly unfortunate for he was reading books which might have inspired him to be critical of that philosopher.

2

Within two weeks of his arrival in Leipzig, Nietzsche discovered the work of Arthur Schopenhauer and, although he may have nursed some intellectual reservations, subscribed to many of the man's doctrines for at least a decade to come. He could not do this without seriously modifying his earlier esteem for Plato. Schopenhauer might admire the latter and incorporate some of his doctrines into his masterwork, but ultimately he was a representative of voluntarism, an ethical position incompatible with Platonic intellectualism. To put it simply, Plato argued that virtue was knowledge and knowledge sufficient to determine the will. For Schopenhauer, the intellect was a tool in the service of the will. These positions could be difficult to reconcile, although Schopenhauer struggled mightily.¹⁴ We do not know whether Nietzsche observed this inconsistency, but given the scrutiny he devoted to his idol, it would have been surprising if he did not.

Around nine months after his arrival in Leipzig, Nietzsche read Friedrich Albert Lange's *The History of Materialism and Critique of Its Meaning for the Present*, a work that impressed him enough to shake some of his admiration for Schopenhauer.¹⁵ As it happens, Lange scarcely mentions Plato in the first edition of his book, the one Nietzsche read at Leipzig.¹⁶ However, he strongly praises Democritus and the Sophists, and this can only be at Plato's expense, for that philosopher mocked the Sophists and would necessarily have opposed Democritus.¹⁷ This could only have further lowered Plato's stock in Nietzsche's eyes, for Lange arraigned idealism (and indeed any traditional metaphysic) on grounds quite different from Schopenhauer's.

Nietzsche's former reverence for Plato might have received a further check through Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, another book which he read at this time. This work offered a three-hundred-year history of Greek philosophy from Thales to Epicurus, delineating not just individuals, but the interplay and opposition of teachers, students, and peers. Diogenes is certainly not hostile to Plato and he acknowledges that many esteem him highly. Yet he expresses no strong approval, as indeed, he rarely expresses strong views on any of the dozens of philosophers he presents. This insouciance, which might prove refreshing in an era of hero worship, ultimately has a disenchanting effect. Philosophers today—and in Nietzsche's time—consider Plato a giant in the field. Diogenes would not disagree, yet in his sequential

account Plato becomes yet another philosopher, one who is more significant perhaps than many of his contemporaries but not essentially different in kind. Clever anecdotes are told of him, and a dour, rough, yet vivid personality emerges. The effect, however, is to remove Plato's nimbus and to make him just another "character" in Diogenes' menagerie. Nietzsche would definitely have found Plato treated less reverently than he was by his teachers.

3

Up to now we have only presented situations that *might* have affected Nietzsche's views of Plato. We have no written evidence by him that they did so. This silence is broken at last, beginning in the fall of 1867 when he began to research the number of books written by Democritus. During these investigations, Nietzsche frequently considered schools which might have influenced atomism, and this approach led him to Plato, whom he often associated with the Orphics and Pythagoreans. Most of these notations seem value-free, purely theoretical hypotheses. Some are colorfully expressed, however, and it was within this context that harshly expressed judgments of Plato first appeared.

Several of these turn on a charge that Lange had himself mentioned, that Plato had wanted "to buy up and burn all the works of Democritus."¹⁸ Lange's account rests on the anecdote given by Diogenes, which Nietzsche used as his own source: "Aristoxenus . . . affirms that Plato wished to burn all the writings of Democritus that he could collect, but that [two Pythagoreans] prevented him, saying that there was no advantage in doing so, for the books were already widely circulated."¹⁹ Nietzsche puzzled over this anecdote numerous times, sometimes exonerating Plato, but increasingly asserting that the charge was true and damning. Eventually he seems to have believed that even if Plato failed, his ostensible attempt to annihilate the writings of Democritus was carried out by other of the atomist's enemies, notably the early Christians.²⁰ Thus, Nietzsche's association of Plato with early Christianity—and his belief that this connection was pernicious—begins quite early. If Plato could not conduct his own *auto-da-fé* (Nietzsche's expression), others would do it for him.

On the one hand, it is striking how lacking in nuance and ungrounded in specific texts these later views are in comparison with the earlier essay on the *Symposium*. At the same time it would probably be a mistake to regard any of these positions, even those he repeated later, as definitive at this time. As the changing meaning of Plato's longing to burn some books suggests, these were possibilities that Nietzsche entertained rather than final positions that he upheld. Indeed, the effect of reading

Nietzsche's *Nachlass* during his Leipzig years is to recognize on the one hand how endlessly fertile he could be in devising hypotheses, and how fluid these could be—no sooner proposed than countered by another.

4

Nietzsche's negative comments on Plato were not limited to his notebooks. In a series of letters written between late spring and early fall of 1868, that is, during the same period he was working on Democritus, he wrote a number of admonitory letters to his friend, Paul Deussen. In these he repeatedly arraigned Plato when berating his friend, who had planned to write a dissertation on that philosopher. (As Deussen explains in his memoirs, he himself was obsessed with Plato at this time.)²¹ It is important to stress that Nietzsche's purpose in these letters was less to address Plato than to exhibit to his friend the error of his ways. (Among Deussen's delinquencies, he did not engage in philology so professionally as his friend advised, nor did he transfer to Leipzig to join Nietzsche under Ritschl. Worst of all, he preferred Plato to Schopenhauer.) Accordingly, while these letters unquestionably reflect Nietzsche's views on the current status of Platonic studies and on Plato himself, their point is less to announce those views than to express his frustration with the apparent obstinacy of his friend. They do however complement remarks made in his notebooks, suggesting that during this period Nietzsche could be quite hostile toward Plato.

Since the complaints to Deussen provide a particularly direct expression of Nietzsche's concerns regarding Plato, they should be stated explicitly. For a start, Nietzsche argues that if Deussen wants to make a contribution to philology, he should abandon such glamorous and well-trod territory as Platonic studies for topics which are less explored. ("Do you think," he asks, "that I feel as full and happy with my Laertius and Suidas work as I would if reading Faust or Schopenhauer?")²² In other words, Plato has already received too much attention to justify treatment by a comparative neophyte. This, of course, is not a comment on Plato but on the current state of academic studies. Nonetheless, Nietzsche makes the point vigorously, and since it concerns Plato it should be recorded here.

Nietzsche is further skeptical of current editions of Plato, believing that the commonly accepted order of the dialogues is questionable and that some dialogues had been misattributed.²³ This view would scarcely have been original with Nietzsche. Diogenes had already expressed misgivings concerning both the accepted order and authorship of Plato's dialogues—he suggested that *The Republic* had been taken from a

work by Protagoras ²⁴ —and Nietzsche’s philosophy professor at Bonn, Karl Schaarschmidt, had published two books on this subject. Further, most of Nietzsche’s own philological studies centered on discovering misattributions and foreign interpolations within standard texts, so this is a concern that would easily have occurred to him.

Nietzsche also complains that Plato is difficult to get a handle on and cannot be approached piecemeal. He is particularly contemptuous of efforts by scholars to resolve issues through philological scrutiny. Instead, a fresh interpretation of the entire corpus is required. “The Platonic issue is presently a huge complex, a web intertwined in its interior, an organism. Such issues should be handled on a grand scale; how does it help to gnaw on some outward point, to gnaw punctiliously on the issue’s skin!”²⁵ Nietzsche believed that his own (and Deussen’s) former teachers had been particularly guilty of this practice, and, he continued, “What good does it do Schaarschmidt to produce a few tricks [*Leichtfertigkeiten*] and exaggerations! The [scholarly] investigations have already reached their peak; it’s now a matter of psychological insights [*psychologische Einsichten*]; what is now necessary is to reconstruct Plato’s psychological and intellectual process [*Platos Seelen- und Geistesgang*] and not in the hazy [*verschwommenn*] ways of Schleiermacher or the old Steinhart.”²⁶ This is probably the richest and most tantalizing statement Nietzsche made at this time concerning his views on Plato. What he means by “Plato’s psychological and intellectual process” and “psychological insights” is unknown. However, he clearly believed that the entire Platonic system had to be reconsidered, and presumably he had specific grounds for issuing this demand. His call also suggests that his ultimate views on Plato were provisional and would remain so until the reconstruction he envisioned was complete. If he ever embarked on such a project, he does not record it here.

5

On April 15, 1868, Nietzsche wrote Friedrich Zarncke, editor of the *Literarisches Centralblatt*, to which he had just submitted a review, that he felt confident in writing about a number of Greek authors, some obvious (Theognis, Diogenes Laertius, Democritus), others less so (Athenaeus).²⁷ Plato figures prominently, and Nietzsche is clearly declaring himself competent to expound on that subject. This claim should be treated with caution. From a professional point of view, Nietzsche was reviewing books as a philologist, not as a philosopher. While he probably did believe that he could evaluate Plato philosophically, Zarncke would expect him to concentrate on textual

issues. Nonetheless, he could hardly deal with philological matters without a sound grasp of Plato's views. To that extent Nietzsche is announcing himself as philosophically competent in the Platonic philosophy.

It would be another year before Nietzsche received a degree and left Leipzig for Basel, and during that time he continued as before, treating Plato only as a side path on his mainstream researches. Unlike his complaints to Deussen (all written during 1868), most of these later notebook entries on Plato are tepidly composed and seem value-free. Indeed, once Nietzsche dropped the Democritus project,²⁸ his animus against Plato vanished as well. During his final months in Leipzig, he addressed Plato only incidentally and without evident malice. Instead, he was interested in the lineage of schools and spent considerable space aligning Plato with or against potential competitors. Yet if Nietzsche's anger at Plato and his association of the latter with the damage wrought by Christianity had gone into abeyance, it appears not to have been extinguished. The negative views he formed on Plato during his final years in Leipzig would be repeated in the years to come. He might qualify them at times; he might examine other aspects of Plato which he found more congenial. However, a fundamental antipathy had been aroused and would never disperse. Significantly, his final word on this subject to Deussen was wearily contemptuous: "Give up Plato," he wrote. "You are embracing a cloud."²⁹

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Notes

¹ Thomas Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Wrestling with Plato and Platonism" in *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*. Ed. Paul Bishop. Camden House, 2004. 241-259. Many facts noted in this article were first mentioned by Brobjer. These would include Nietzsche's purchase of the two volumes of Plato, his fondness for the *Symposium*, the Steinhart letter, the Jahn and Schaarschmidt lectures, the letter to Zarncke, and a mention of Nietzsche's Plato researches in his *Nachlass*. Brobjer 2004, 242-243.

² Brobjer 2004, 241.

³ Reiner Bohley, "Über die Landesschule zur Pforte: Materialien aus der Schulzeit Nietzsches," *Nietzsche-Studien*, V. 5 – 1976. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 298-320. P. 309. These syllabi were drawn from the *Jahresberichte in den Programmen der Koeniglichen Landesschule Pforte 1859-1865*.

⁴ The abbreviation “*Phaed.*” is unfortunate, since it could refer either to the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus*. Nietzsche does not mention reading either dialogue at this time, although of course he may have done so.

⁵ KSAB I: Letter 383 (26 Sept. 63) 258. The second of a six-volume collection edited by Gottfried Hermann, this volume included Greek texts of the *Parmenides*, *Philebus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades I and II*, *Hipparchus*, *Rival Lovers*, and *Theages*.

⁶ KSAB I: Letter 427 (Mid-June, 1864) 284. Volume I of the same Hermann edition mentioned in the preceding footnote. (Nietzsche would shortly purchase the remaining four volumes in this series and retain them to the end of his life.) The dialogues contained in this volume included *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. For further information, see Giuliano Campioni, Paolo D'Iorio, Maria Christina Fornari, Francesco Fronterota, and Andrea Orsucci, with Renate Mueller Buck, *Nietzsches persoenliche Bibliothek*, Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 2003, 440-441.

⁷ Brobjer 2004, 242, records that Nietzsche intended to read the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro* during vacation in 1863. Presumably he bases this on BAW III: 223, although Nietzsche there says he will read these dialogues *after* summer vacation and during the examination period. That entry should not be overlooked, although it was not transferred to the KGW. However, Nietzsche is only *proposing* to read these dialogues, not stating that he actually did so, and he did not purchase the volume containing these dialogues until over a year later. (See fn. 6.)

⁸ KGW I-3, 419.

⁹ KGW I-3, 384-388.

¹⁰ KGB I-4, 338.

¹¹ Campioni et al. 2003. 442. While he made a couple of notations on the cover page and elsewhere, these seem to have nothing to do with Jahn's lectures. KGB I-4, 336.

¹² See, for example, C. Schaarschmidt, *Die Sammlung der platonischen Schriften zur Scheidung der Echten von den Unechten*, Bonn: bei Adolph Marcus, 1866.

¹³ Nietzsche's "silence" may have been due less to discretion than suppression. He apparently destroyed one or more notebooks kept during his first two years at Leipzig.

¹⁴ Schopenhauer argued, of course, that the will objectified itself through the medium of Platonic forms (WWR I, 128-130), and could free itself from phenomenal illusion through apprehension of these forms (WWR I, 178-181). However, such self-transcendence was so rare and inexplicable as to cause him great trouble.

¹⁵ Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*. Iserlohn: Verlag von J. Bader, 1866.

¹⁶ In the English version of the 2nd edition Plato receives ten rather critical pages. Friedrich Albert Lange, *The History of Materialism and criticism of Its Present Importance*, tr. Ernest Chester Thomas. New York: The Humanities Press, 1950. I: 71-80.

¹⁷ As Diogenes observes, Plato does not mention Democritus in his writings. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vol., tr. R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library. Harvard University Press, 1925. I: 299.

¹⁸ Lange 1866, 12. See also James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. 43-44.

¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius 1925. II: 448-451.

²⁰ KGW I-4, 59 [1], 504-505.

²¹ Paul Deussen, *Mein Leben*, ed. Dr. Erika Rosenthal-Deussen. Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus. 1922. 98. Despite Nietzsche's advice, Deussen wrote his *Promotionsschrift* on *The Sophist*. Heiner Feldhoff, *Nietzsches Freund: Die Lebensgeschichte des Paul Deussen*. Köln Weimar Wien: Böhlau Verlag GmbH & Cie, 2008. 66.

²² KSAB II Letter 575 (22 June 1868) 290-291.

²³ KSAB II Letter 568 (End of April/Beginning of May 1868); 270. Nietzsche gives no specifics in his letter. However, this topic arises frequently in his notebooks, particularly when he is discussing Thrasyllus, the first to arrange the dialogues in sets of four. See, for example, KGW I-4, 58 [41], 479, where he not only considers arrangement by fours but by threes. Compare KGW I-4, 52 [2], 171.

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius 1925. I: 327.

²⁵ KSAB II Letter 568 (End of April/Beginning of May, 1868) 270.

²⁶ KSAB II Letter 568 (End of April/Beginning of May, 1868) 270. These remarks immediately follow Nietzsche's complaint that Plato's work forms a huge complex of issues which must be investigated on a grand scale. They are obviously a gloss on that claim.

²⁷ KSAB II, Letter 566 (15 April 1868), 266. Nietzsche had just submitted a review concerning Hesiod's *Theogony*.

²⁸ KSAB II, Letter 559 (1-3 Feb. 1868) 249-250.

²⁹ KSAB II Letter 588 (September 1868) 316.